

We have just launched ourselves into Spring and now have before us the month of April. The beginning of April often for me brings to mind the lines from T. S. Eliot's great modernist poem, a poem that many of us know, *The Wasteland*. Published in 1922, Eliot begins the first section of his poem entitled *The Burial of the Dead* by saying:

*April is the cruellist month, breeding
lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
dull roots with spring rain.*

This often is where we are at the beginning of April. The land is dead but waking up. Some things long dormant are slowly quickening with life. It is a time of stirring dull roots with spring rain.

This juxtaposition of life and death, in Eliot's famous poem, is something that I think Mary and Martha might understand as they deal with the death of their brother Lazarus, a shortened form for the name Eleazar. For a while they live with the hope that Jesus will come during the time of Lazarus' illness. But then he dies. Listen for the mixture of hope and the dull reality of death in these words:

Martha says Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.

For Mary, however, there are no lilacs rising out of the dead land, no spring rain stirring the dull roots of the soil. She simply says: *Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died--* and leaves it at that. Here is Jesus coming like the promise of Spring, like the promise of life itself-- but coming too late.

Lazarus has been dead four days. Jewish belief is that the soul leaves the body after three days and now it is four and this reality underscores the reality of his death.

When Jesus arrives, he displays, on the one hand, a profound humanity as he listens and within his own being receives the burden of his friend's deep grief. He weeps with them and provides the balm of compassion, an example that we should heed. Listening is a great spiritual gift. It opens the door to compassion. And here Mary and Martha's grief disturbs Jesus deeply.

At the tomb itself, a cave, Jesus takes charge. He issues three imperatives. *Take away the stone. Lazarus come out! Unbind him and let him go.* The Gospel of John tells us: *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth.*

The season which we are now concluding marks off forty days of Lent but does not include the Sundays. These Sundays are termed *little Easters* or *mini-Easters*. Here we celebrate Eucharist and remember the passion and the resurrection of Jesus. And now on this fifth and final Sunday we come upon Lazarus bound up with strips of cloth, coming forth out of the darkness of a cave where he has been buried.

I invite you to think of this image as a small and more narrowly defined story of Easter. Here we have a small canvass and it prepares us for that large canvass of Easter itself. Lazarus standing in the sunlight and people slowly unwrapping his grave clothes is a small depiction of Easter and of resurrection that prefigures and prepares us for the great cosmic event of Jesus' passion and Jesus' rising up from the grave.

This past week in our Lenten study of I Corinthians we came upon a very early tradition of the early church. Paul reminds the unruly people of Corinth:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received that Christ died for our sins...that he was buried...that he was raised on the third day...and that he appeared to Cephas and the twelve.

This is an ancient text and understanding--very early. Note the key terms: died, buried, raised, appeared. Now consider Lazarus and his story. He has died and has been buried four days. In the presence of Jesus he has encountered the power of God (been raised) and has come forth. Has appeared.

But when he emerges from the darkness, it is his presence in the sunlight that interests me. Lazarus has come out of a dark place, a confined space, the confined space and isolation of his own death. And the past still clings to him, layer upon layer of grave clothes make it awkward for him to even move. His face itself is covered. His hearing is impaired, his eye sight, his tongue.

And then, slowly, as they begin to unwind all of those strips of cloth, slowly he emerges into a new time. For me, the whole picture is liberation. *Unbind him*, Jesus says. And then slowly all of the clothing of his most recent past begins to fall away.

You and I are not unlike Lazarus. The past clings to us as well. Memories, deep impressions, some of which we recognize along with others that elude us to remain only in the background -- emotions, thoughts, experiences, habits, assumptions about who we are and who we must be, messages from authority figures, messages from ourselves-- some of these things and perhaps many of them can cling to us and keep us wrapped up in an ungainly fashion so that we stand in the sunlight of the moment with our past insulating and isolating us from who we are and can be. Some of these things can be glorious. But others as they rest upon us and seek to form us are like Lazarus clothes. They cling. They cloud our vision or dampen our speech or impair our spiritual balance.

Can we unwind, unwrap a new identity in the presence of the love of God and of God's Spirit?

Resurrection is about new life not old life. About liberation. And it can include an opportunity for us to claim a new sense of identity. To unwrap and unwind the old as we claim the new. And this works for churches just like it works for individuals. Negative memories, negative experiences in churches are like Lazarus clothes.

As layer after layer comes off of his body, suddenly Lazarus recovers his sense of balance. Suddenly he can move about freely. Easter, even mini- Easter, means liberation.

The Orthodox Church especially understands this story of Lazarus as a prefiguring of Easter, a foreshadowing of the resurrection of Christ and as a promise of the general Resurrection.

Today other readings also place before us the Gospel message of renewal, new life, energy, and hope. Our reading from Romans proclaims *To set the mind on the flesh is death but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace*. Listen to that sentence as Eugene Peterson's paraphrase attempts to impart its message of freedom: *Obsession with self in these matters is a dead end; attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life.* Unwrap a new sense of identity.

And then there is that great passage from the prophet Ezekiel this morning in our first lesson. Ezekiel presents us with yet another vision, a vision of dry bones being suddenly renewed, suddenly claimed by spirit that brings them once more to life.

In this season of dull roots being stirring with spring rain and new life, it is this mini Easter shift from death and darkness to sunlight and new life that I invite all of us to consider this morning. For Ezekiel it is a movement from a dry collection of bones to an organized and living body; for Lazarus it is a movement out of the cave into the sunlight; for Martha and Mary a movement from grief and despair to renewed hope. What is it for you and for me? This shift, this movement, this unwrapping of grave clothes? As we come together this morning on a day of little Easter, let us prayerfully and in the presence of an enabling Spirit move away from anything that imprisons us to a wholeness that can liberate us. Let us pay attention to God and move out into the open, spacious free life. And now let us consider Lazarus, a certain man named Lazarus, as he feels the last of the grave clothes leave his restored and enlivened body.

Today is a little Easter.

Centuries before Martha and Mary and their grief, the very nation of Israel, during the time of Ezekiel the prophet, would understand

I remembered the beginning of Eliot's poem but I had quite forgotten one of his images near the end of *The Wasteland*. I ran across it the other day:

In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing

Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel.

There is an empty chapel, only the wind's home.

It has no windows, and the door swings,

Dry bones can harm no one.

Outline

Start with April and Eliot. Move to Israel. Move to dry bones. Move to Lazarus. Move to mini Easter at the end. Canvas small for canvass large.

Sundays in Lent Little or Mini Easter

On this mini Easter in Lent we come upon the story of Lazarus and the raising of Lazarus. I invite you to think of this story as a mini-canvass. A small depiction of Easter and of resurrection that prefigures and prepares us for the great cosmic event of Jesus' passion and Jesus' raising.

This week we came across an tradition from the early church. Paul quotes this tradition.

Key terms: died, buried, rose again on the third day, appeared.

Note Lazarus in this regard: died, buried in a tomb, remained there for four days. Encountered the power of G-d in Jesus. Came forth.

Lazarus

Extended family member of Jesus.

Short for Eleazar

A certain man

Dead four days (three days and then the soul leaves)

In John, the raising of Lazarus concludes Jesus' public ministry. A threat goes out against him. He withdraws. Even now the disciples fear that he will die and they with him but they join him in returned to Bethany.

April is the cruelist month. Breeding lilacs out of the dead land. Mixing memory and desire. Stirring dull roots with spring rain.

This is the reality for Mary and Martha as Lazarus has died. I think especially Mary could say that. Here is Jesus coming like the promise of

Spring, like the promise of renewal, like the promise of life itself. But coming too late:

Mary and Martha both say *Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.* Martha says *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.* But Mary says simply *Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died.*

Dry bones.

There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home./ It has no windows and the door swings./ Dry bones can harm no one.

Israel in the time of Ezekiel would understand. In our lesson this morning we have heard these lines of lament: Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.

Ezekiel Prophecy to these bones and say to them... and they shall live.

Unwrapping Lazarus

The [Orthodox Church](#) and [Byzantine Catholic Church](#) commemorate Lazarus on **Lazarus Saturday**,^[1] the day before [Palm Sunday](#), which is a [moveable feast](#) day. This day, together with Palm Sunday, hold a unique position in the church year, as days of joy and triumph between the penitence of [Great Lent](#) and the mourning of [Holy Week](#).^[35] During the preceding week, the hymns in the [Lenten Triodion](#) track the sickness and then the death of Lazarus, and Christ's journey from beyond [Jordan](#) to Bethany. The scripture readings and hymns for Lazarus Saturday focus on the resurrection of Lazarus as a foreshadowing of the [Resurrection of Christ](#), and a promise of the [General Resurrection](#). The Gospel narrative is interpreted in the hymns as illustrating the [two natures](#) of Christ: his *humanity* in asking, "Where have ye laid him?",^[36] and his *divinity* by commanding Lazarus to come forth from the dead.^[37] Many of the Resurrectional hymns of the normal Sunday service, which are omitted on Palm Sunday, are chanted on Lazarus Saturday.

